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ABSTRACT

Based on the experiences of an administrator of a small Arizona school district, the paper addresses significant forces within special education in the past decade and future challenges. Past forces included: a drive for services by parents and others who defined handicapped children by their particular defects, thus forcing a categorical approach on special education; the federal mandate of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act; a crusading zeal among parents and newly trained professionals; the search for a viable special education technology; and limitations of financial resources. The Kyrene, Arizona, school district and other small districts have responded to these forces in such ways as use of cross-categorical resource rooms to serve the mildly handicapped, enrichment pullout programs for the gifted, and a movement toward increased definition of special education as a data based field capable of accomplishing learning among the hard to teach students. Increasing scrutiny of special education has provided little data demonstrating the effectiveness of defect remediation methodologies or of categorical pullout programs. Current trends include fading of the boundaries between special and regular education, an emphasis on effective instruction and schools, and continuing financial limitations. Among future needs of the field are change from within, education of parents and allied professionals, more concern with cost effectiveness, changes in service delivery, and changes in curriculum. (DB)

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Special Education in a Small School District: Past, Present, and Future

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The Kyrene School District is an elementary district serving kindergarten through eighth grade students in rapidly-growing suburban Phoenix, Arizona. Kyrene currently serves approximately 5,000 students residing in five municipal or governmental divisions, including the Gila River Indian Reservation. There are six elementary schools and one junior high school in Kyrene, and two new schools are scheduled to open next fall to accommodate an annual growth rate of almost 25 per cent. Kyrene is an ethnic and socio-economic mix, including Anglos, Hispanics, and Native Americans.

Ten years ago, roads into the Kyrene School District were narrow two-lane ribbons of pavement frequently banded on each side by an irrigation ditch and rows of heavily bearded palm trees. Continuing south, concrete yielded to flat dust and gravel roadways punctuated regularly by humped crossings over the ditches. Cotton fields basked in the dusty sunshine, and fluffy white sheep grazed with no sense of the explosion to come as Phoenix would begin to leap south in future years.

In the northernmost two miles of the district, eager suburbanites and retirees had begun to stretch out into the countryside away from grocery stores, stop lights, and fast food restaurants. Ancient-looking red stucco and brick district office buildings stood on a tree-bordered campus buffered between a dairy and a stable.

The suburbanites were in the minority ten years ago. They were welcomed into a Kyrene long populated primarily by farmers and farm workers. Ethnically there was a mix. Anglos and Hispanics outnumbered Native Americans, the majority of whom journeyed to Kyrene daily from remote communities on the Gila River Indian Reservation.

Special education for handicapped and gifted students was relatively new in Kyrene. Its planning, design, and implementation resulted from response to forces that were consistent realities for small districts all over the country.

In what follows, I have attempted to label and address what I believe were the significant forces within special education ten years ago, to trace the impact of those forces over the past decade, and to describe how those same forces have evolved to provide current and future challenges and opportunities for the field of special education in small districts.

Change from outside A first force affecting special education in the early 1970's was externally prompted change. Change was being brought rapidly from

outside the field. Special education as it exists today in the public schools was molded by external forces. Handicapped children were, in effect, defined by the courts as a minority group which had been denied its right to access public education. The prime movers in this drive for service were parents divided into categorical camps, not public school professionals.

Categorical focus The external forces that created handicapped children as a minority group also, I believe, created a second force which continues to have a profound impact on the field of special education. This early group of largely non-educator change agents, i.e., parents, courts, attorneys, etc. viewed handicapped children as minorities by virtue of their defects, i.e., mental retardation, learning disability, hearing impairment. These defects became the focus of categorical definitions, identification processes, and remediation efforts imposed on the schools.

Rules, regulations, and funding formulas at the federal and state levels were designed categorically. University training programs prepared teachers for categorical certification. We were, in essence, mandated into a defect orientation. School psychologists were assigned a prominent role in this mandated special education. They were given the task of verifying children's defects. Verfication enabled service. Remediation techniques billed as therapeutic were developed that promised impact on or even cure of the defect. Such techniques offered parents repatterning of a child's brain or restructuring of defective sensory motor integration. In the areas of sensory and physical impairments, children were identified, labeled, and served together in schools by virtue of their defects rather than characteristics of their educational performance.

Within the field of emotional disturbance the search for the defect was a long, costly, and continuing one. Treatment mode depended on belief regarding etiology or the nature of the defect. Physiological, psychoanalytic,

behavioral, and ecological camps formed and remained. Gifted education translated the definition of category by defect into the definition of a category by status rather than learning characteristics. Students with a high general intelligence or creativity score were placed together without consideration for differential ability in verbal or quantitative reasoning areas.

Early spirit Special education in the schools a decade ago, then, was supported by a mandate and defined by a focus on children's defects. A third force in evidence a decade ago within special education was a sort of spirit of missionary zeal among parents and some professionals. Parents had focused on the ultimate goal of access, and they had won the battle. They saw access to schools as a sort of panacea, the end rather than a means to another end.

Parents were joined in spirit by a rapidly growing cadre of newly trained young professionals and by a hopeful group of long-enduring dedicated professionals who saw the mandate as a great promise for the future. Among both handicapped and gifted groups, Child Find efforts were pursued as a kind of crusade to find the unserved or underserved.

These were heady times. The blush of victory gave sanction to the mission. Special education promoted itself as a sort of Statute of Liberty profession..."give us your tired, troubled children, and we will cure them."

The mandate required a free, appropriate, least restrictive program for all handicapped students. The defect orientation promoted the move to categorical programs, means of identification, and funding. Parameters of the effort beyond categorical access were at this point poorly defined, however. The search for a technology that would empower the field to fulfill the mandate's intent was only beginning.

Search for definition The proper mesh of categorical definition and identification with educational technology was unclear. What was "special" about

special education had yet to be defined. This lack of definition and the beginning of a search for viable technology was a fourth force within special education ten years ago. Teachers within districts, professionals within the field, and faculties at the university level disagreed over what technology would work. Data was slow in coming and not always widely reviewed when it was available. Splits formed between those focusing on defect remediation and those aiming directly for skill acquisition. Professional schisms occurred between school psychologists and teachers. Psychologists found defects that teachers could already see and sometimes documented lack of progress, but psychologists frequently weren't trained to assist in designing/implementing effective programming. In the area of gifted, advocates of enrichment split from advocates of acceleration. Parents found inconsistent and differently defined categories and services between states and even districts within states. Special education presented an indecisive and quarrelsome front to its many publics.

Special educators in the early days of the mandate were a mixed group in terms of their beliefs about appropriate technology. They were also a mixed group in terms of competence, training, and qualifications. Districts caught unprepared for the mandate sometimes responded by placing teachers they wanted to get rid of in special education classrooms. These teachers taught alongside highly competent, dedicated old-timers and bright, eager well-trained newcomers.

Limitation of financial resources All other forces within special education ten years ago were controlled to some extent by a final force: limitations of financial resources. The federal money provided was designed to offset the excess costs of educating handicapped students; however, it has never been sufficient to do so. State monies, too, have lagged far behind reality. Districts have been left in the position of taking money away from non-

handicapped children to provide for handicapped children.

Kyrene responded to these forces in ways similar to many other small districts. It served grades kindergarten through eight and had fewer than 1,000 students, of whom perhaps 50 could be called handicapped. Another approximately 100 were labeled gifted. This number was high because of the identification process used at the time. The 50 were almost all mildly handicapped. Because of the smallness of the district, they were all served in cross-categorical resource rooms. This was most cost effective and seemed to meet the intent of the law. Little direction was given, however, to the type of service delivered in the resource rooms or its mesh with regular classrooms. Access, least restrictive environment, and affordable costs were primary considerations. Severely handicapped students were tuitioned to neighboring Tempe, which had established a segregated school for severely handicapped students. Gifted students were served by an enrichment pullout two half days per week. There were special education and gifted coordinators.

During the past decade, Kyrene has grown by more than 500 per cent. It has increased by approximately 25 per cent each of the last four years. It has added five new schools and will continue to add one or two new schools each year. The sheep and cotton fields have moved much farther south, displaced seemingly overnight by subdivisions, shopping centers, and light industry. Stop lights dot almost every corner, and traffic backs up during pronounced "rush hours." The red stucco and brick buildings of the district office endure on land that becomes more valuable yearly. Repair costs have increased but don't detract from bonding capacity needed to build new schools. Large areas of open land nearby are being claimed for development, contributing as many as 13,000 homes each.

Kyrene, during this period of rapid change, has continued to respond to

forces that are similar to those responded to elsewhere and also that are logical continuations of the forces at work a decade ago. Within this time special education here and in other small districts has changed more from within than because of external forces. The nature of this change, I believe, has been movement toward increased definition as a data based field capable of producing learning in hard to teach students.

Change from within/Definition of a field Even in the flush of a mandate victory ten years ago, deep disagreement existed within all levels of special education concerning what was "special" about it. In the years that have followed the field has produced/maintained highly competent, dedicated professionals who have become, in many cases, "the cream of the public school crop." These people correctly see mandated access as only a beginning and learning as an end. They have become increasingly analytical about their students' educational needs and their own instruction. They have been empowered by research about effective instruction to become data-based decision makers on behalf of their students.

This increasingly specific scrutiny of the "what" and "how" of special education has begun to focus critical and questioning attention on some of the directions chosen by the field ten or more years ago. First of all, the defect or categorical orientation has proven to be a less than ideal basis upon which to identify students and design educational interventions. There has been little data showing defect remediation methodologies to impact on educational performance. Effective methodologies are effective across categories or "defects" and with nonhandicapped as well as handicapped learners. Emerging data has shown effective strategies to respond through focused instruction to learning characteristics and skill deficits of handicapped students.

Other mainstays of mandated special education for mildly handicapped

students have also failed to live up to their promise. Categorical pullout programs have proven redundant, and self-contained classrooms in many cases have failed to produce academic gains commensurate with their expectations.

Recent research shows special education pullout in many cases to result in decreased actual instruction and practice time in areas targeted for remediation. A smaller quantity of instructional time has been made even less valuable by special education's frequent use of different curriculum objectives and materials than the mainstream classrooms. It seems that in our efforts to provide "special" we've often designed a program that was less intense - in terms of instructional time, practice time, and consistency of objectives and materials - for our hard to teach students than for our nonhandicapped regular classroom students. Three-year re-evaluations frequently attest to the weakness of our efforts.

During the past ten years special education has gathered the evidence needed to make viable a shift from a defect remediation/categorical model to a data-based instructional intervention model designed to serve all hard to teach students. A parallel movement has occurred within regular education in the form of newly-focused attention on characteristics of effective instruction and effective schools.

Very recently the boundaries between regular and special education have begun to fade as it has become increasingly clear that effective instruction is effective for all students. What's special about special education is the added intensity it can provide for students who are hard to teach for any of a variety of reasons from a sensory impairment to a developmental delay. In the area of gifted education focus on enrichment vs. acceleration seems to have decreased, and attention to students' needs for academic instruction beyond what can be reasonably provided within the regular classroom has increased.

We are on the threshold, I believe, of being able to apply what the last ten years of evidence has told us about what special education should and shouldn't be. We have seen a shaping of the field from within and a clearer, more analytical look at how exceptional students can best be taught. Focus on defects and categories has begun to yield to data-based instructional decision making with a goal of most intensive intervention possible with least intrusion.

Special education demythologized As special education has gained an increasing sense of technological definition, the early theme of missionary spirit and oneness with parents has been altered and to some extent eroded. The early panacea promises have not been fulfilled, and as special education has struggled to define what will work, parents have seen the field demythologized. In many cases parents have maintained a categorical or defect-oriented viewpoint. They are sometimes supported in this view by physicians, psychologists in private practice, allied professionals, and private school personnel. Rather than focusing on types of service needed because of a child's learning characteristics, they look at types of programs for "children like Joey." In many cases we have not been successful in educating parents and related professionals outside education to analyze children's needs and available programming resources from an instructional focus, i.e., "What services are needed so that instruction can be most intensified with least intrusion in meeting this child's needs?"

Continuation of financial limitations A final force continuing from the past is the limitation of financial resources. This remains as a given with which all small school districts must cope. In private enterprise competition is generally with outsiders, and the process of competing builds esprit de corps within. In education the reverse is true. Competition for money - survival - is from within, and the process of competing creates divisions within the

organization. This is especially painful in small organizations. Handicapped and gifted children, as minorities, are in perpetual jeopardy. With no increase in state funding, a probable decrease in federal assistance, a push to increase teachers' salaries, higher utilities, insurance costs, etc., the continuing problem seems clear. Special education must be able to provide documentably cost-effective services for its members in order to survive.

The Kyrene District, more than ten years ago, made decisions about special education that were based partly on humanitarian feelings that handicapped children needed to be in the mainstream and partly on practical logic that cross-categorical resource rooms were the least costly and most flexible way to provide services. The fact that categorical, self-contained programs were not begun was serendipity that gives Kyrene great opportunity as a small district to provide flexibly for great diversity in the future. To some extent, Kyrene as a small district was unable to make a choice to follow the trend toward categorical programming, and, as a result, remains today somewhat better poised for the future.

Kyrene's special education program today is a somewhat unusual one. Its stated goal is to assist in providing an appropriately intensive instructional program for all hard to teach students, with the least possible intrusion into the regular classroom, through shared responsibility for these children between regular and special education. The model is called Resource-Consultative. Resource teachers at each school provide direct services to identified - and in some cases nonidentified - mildly handicapped, sensory impaired, and physically handicapped students during 80 per cent of their time. They spend the other 20 per cent of their time working consultatively as peers with regular classroom teachers to analyze problem situations, plan program changes, and implement appropriate interventions with any hard to teach students. The consultation

process is initiated by classroom teachers who make a "referral for assistance" to their Resource teachers. Psychologists assist in problem-solving efforts prior to eligibility consideration, using assessment and observation information as a contribution to data-based decision-making rather than verification of a defect. School site Child Study Teams, composed of regular and special educators, assist the consultative process by providing help with problem solving, authority for decisions, and mediation for disagreements. One extended resource room each, at the elementary and junior high levels, provides a more restrictive environment for a small number of students who are less able because of a combination of academic and behavioral difficulties to function in the mainstream. Neither class has ever had more than eight students at any time. Severely handicapped students continue to be tuitioned to a nearby Tempe school because of low incidence. Kyrene's percentages of placed students are somewhat lower than demographically similar nearby districts, and in numerous cases, children moving into Kyrene who have been enrolled in self-contained special education classes elsewhere are mainstreamed successfully with Resource support.

Gifted students in Kyrene are indentified in the areas of verbal and quantitative reasoning. Beginning in grade three, they receive programming separate from regular classroom instruction in Language Arts if they demonstrate the need. Differentiation of math instruction is provided by grouping within regular education.

The groundwork for future response to challenge and opportunity is already being prepared in Kyrene and elsewhere. The response here as in other small districts nationwide is based upon our path for the past decade or more. Situational dynamics, knowledge and purpose, and serendipity have worked together to generate the current state of the art in special education. As our

awareness of ourselves and our field as it could be continues to grow, we must make knowledge and purpose the controlling partners in determining the future. We need to set goals that will enable us to bend situational dynamics and luck to fit our purpose and what we know to be appropriate for our students.

In order for special education to purposefully apply what we've learned over the past decade or more, to continue to learn, and in so doing, fulfill past promises, there are a number of challenges that must be successfully met.

Need for continued growth/education First of all, special education must continue to change from within. It must continue to conduct research, and it must respond in a timely manner to weight of evidence about what to teach and how to teach handicapped and gifted students. We must do a more efficient job of disseminating useful information to those in the field. In small districts it is sometimes difficult to allocate limited manpower to search current literature. Teachers attempting to remain current with the literature are often discouraged by the enormous quantity of non-significant research published.

In addition to educating ourselves to change, it is essential that we attempt more successfully to educate parents and allied professionals about the potentials and realities of special education. Noneducators who could analyze problem situations or needs and resources from an instructional or educational viewpoint would be a tremendous asset to us. We need to continue to change in response to evidence about effectiveness, and we need to take parents and other professionals with us.

Need for Cost Effectiveness A second reality/challenge that will continue to determine our course to some extent is the anticipated continued limitation of financial resources. Many facts contribute to this reality in small districts like Kyrene. First, there's a possibility of less money available because of federal, state, or local reductions. Second, teachers' salaries are

likely to consume an even greater proportion of available money in the future. Third, school districts are asked to do more and more with little added money. In Arizona, for example, Bilingual and English as a Second Langauge programs were mandated with no additional funding provided. There is a current push for after-school latch key programs.

Fourth, in addition to additional tasks coming by directive, some tasks have expanded because of situational variables. In districts like Kyrene the tremendous growth has unavoidable costs. Time must be spent training and enculturating new staff at all levels. Much staff time is spent evaluating and responding to the needs of students new to the district. The rapid growth seems to be accompanied by increased mobility of families. This means that time spent evaluating and responding to needs must be repeated frequently per special education slot. Another significant situational variable seems, from my vantage point, to be a necessity of dealing with a higher incidence of family problems that impact on school functioning as well as a growing frequency of serious child and adolescent emotional/behavioral problems.

Fifth, an increase in immigration nationwide has placed a burden on the financial resources of schools. For districts, especially small ones, the effort to meet the needs of very low incidences of children from very diverse backgrounds is taxing in terms of money and staff time.

Sixth, the number of low incidence and/or medically fragile children seems to be increasing for a variety of reasons. These are children whose needs are great, and their impact on the financial resources of a small district are tremendous. Costs can become almost surreal in the case of a rural district that must provide a program rather than pay tuition to a larger nearby system.

All of these factors may contribute to even greater financial limitations in the future than we now experience. The limitation is a challenge we must

accept and become better prepared to meet.

Perhaps the most appropriate response to potential financial limitations is increased definition of the field according to what works. We must be as cost effective and efficient as possible. We have a lot of evidence indicating correct directions for us to take. We have the opportunity to change according to what works. The challenge is great. If we succeed, we will at last have defined our field on behalf of those we serve. If we fail, I believe we risk malpractice suits brought by noneducators who have waited for us "to get our act together," and we risk severe cuts in funding because of lack of evidence of effectiveness.

The challenges to change in response to weight of evidence will necessitate renewed consideration of our purpose or our "why," our technology or our "how," and our content or our "what."

The "why" of special education has historically seemed clearest. We were directed to provide free, appropriate, and least restrictive services. We need, I feel, to add a further "why" at this point of looking into the future. Our expanded "why" needs to be that we must share responsibility with regular education for best using all of our resources on behalf of all of the students.

Changes in service delivery This expansion of the "why" opens the door to a lot of rethinking abut "how" services should be delivered. It points to a merging of categories when the technology is the same. This merging would impact on definitions, identification procedures and criteria, funding formulas, university training programs, and teacher certification. Services should be delivered to those children who need those services regardless of why they need them. Their reasons for needing services are important only as they affect or require adaptation of delivery of those services. Teachers could be trained in generic content and instructional technology with practicums designed to prepare

needed specialties like feeding, positioning, and mobility training. These kinds of changes would obviously require significant alterations on the part of universities, state departments, and local education agencies - all bureaucracies not noted for rapid change potential.

In addition to merging of the categories, a commitment to shared responsibility for all students provides the opportunity to merge the technologies of regular and special education. Evaluation, planning, instruction, and management skills are necessary in both fields. The technology is the same. Special education has an opportunity as it faces the future to take responsibility itself for abandoning the mythological methodologies of the past that unsuccessfully attempted to set special education apart qualitatively. We have the opportunity to define ourselves as quantitatively different. We are special because we provide an intensity of instruction that regular education can't because of group size and heterogeneity. We can intensify for hard to teach students, including gifted, by small group instruction, added drill, etc.

As we merge categories and technologies, we need to redefine the role of school psychologist. Rather than serving primarily to verify defects, the school psychologist should become a problem solver, freed from an eligibility determination process. Training programs in school psychology should prepare graduates to analyze children's problems and also analyze curriculum and instructional resources. Unless psychologists can develop this ability to analyze resources, I believe they will be trapped in a defect model and are likely to become extinct, victims of limited financial resources. Psychologists have great potential to be skillful peer assistants. They have a synthesis of the student's educational history and current status. Their information is drawn from multiple sources. They have an opportunity to evaluate the student across a variety of settings using numerous assessment instruments and observa-

tion procedures. They are in a unique position to analyze and summarize a student's performance and progress. They are in am ideal position to help plan if they can analyze curriculum and instruction. This change in focus, like the earlier ones mentioned, requires dramatic movement within a group where the need for change seems less than widely accepted or recognized.

Changes in curriculum In addition to the attention given to needed changes in "how" special education services are delivered, I believe that it's incumbent upon us to take as part of our challenge for the future to look at "what" our curriculum will be. Using the premise that special education will be quantitatively and not qualitatively different, our first effort needs to be to identify ways to provide more intensity and engaged time while keeping the same curriculum objectives as regular education whenever possible.

Some curriculum changes are needed, I believe. We need in many cases to do a better job in the future of analyzing and providing appropriate curriculum objectives. For example, there are objectives in most regular curricula that should be omitted. Handicapped students are frequently held accountable for academic objectives which have little meaning for them. More handicapped students would be able to master essential "regular" objectives if they had the additional time to devote to them that they're now spending on nonessential objectives. Curriculum analysis could solve this problem.

A second and urgent need in the area of special education curriculum is to add a strong focus across content areas and levels of severity on the teaching of learning strategies. We are frequently graduating hard to teach students who have not generalized new learnings across settings, i.e., who are unable to apply what they've learned. They recall content, but can't determine when to retrieve or use it. Without adding this focus to our curriculum we have no hope of creating independent learners able to function in society. Current research

has shown the incredible power and efficiency of strategy instruction for hard to teach students. We need to apply its findings.

A third target for change in special education curriculum is a need for increased focus on content areas, for example social studies and science, that are outside the realm of basic skills. We sometimes pull students out of social studies and science for so many years for help that they leave school without essential general information about their community and the world around them. We have, by omission, made them more handicapped for life as a result of our intervention. This could be changed by incorporating strategy instruction into basic skills content and using social studies and science texts for application practice. Districts would need to identify strategies to be taught and then analyze and integrate basic skills, social studies, and science objectives.

Our curriculum focus within special education has, in many cases, been too narrow-minded in another way. We have targeted academics at the expense of teaching for leisure or vocational skills. This focus must be broadened if we are to alter the depressing current information about our students' status as adults.

As a final thought about curriculum, our regular curriculum may need to be analyzed to insure that we're teaching our non-handicapped students a commitment to global human interdependency that is sufficient to guarantee continued care for all people and an adequate world in which to live.

In summary, the challenge grows. We may have less money in the future, but we have the knowlege potential to be much more efficient and effective than in the past. Our potential can most likely be realized, however, only if we make some reasonably significant changes in what we're doing and how we're doing it. Change must occur at all levels: university, state department, noneducator, school district, classroom. The challenges indicated are big ones that will

demand a significant commitment of resources. Small districts may be particularly hard hit by the drive for quality with limited staff and money to get there.

A logical response to the need for change in the face of limitations of resources would seem to be a unification of efforts from all levels within the field. If needed changes are to be accomplished, I believe that university, state department, and public school personnel must plan, design, and implement in coordination with each other and with allied professionals and parents. Partnerships for change must be equal, however. In past years, state departments and universities have changed compliance procedures and certification requirements, for example, without public school input, or, in some cases, input has been requested that didn't address the critical attribute of the issue at hand. Those most responsible for the delivery of services, i.e., public schools, have been given least control over teacher training, compliance, and funding parameters. In most cases, small school districts have been afforded the opportunity to participate in decision making even less than large ones.

Need for competent personnel A final challenge facing special education is likely to determine the outcome of all those discussed before. That is the challenge and necessity of continuing to attract bright, dedicated people into education and special education. Despite current attention to higher pay for teachers, adequate compensation and improved professional status for teachers is far from a reality in most places. Especially in small districts the struggle to find and keep competent, intelligent teachers is difficult and time-consuming. We also need to insure the quality and competence of those training teachers and those providing the field with research findings.

As I look back over the last ten years in Kyrene and other districts like

it all over the country and beyond, I have a sense of pride about how much we've learned and the sincerity of our efforts. We haven't become a panacea; however, we have greater potential than a decade ago to fulfill the intent of our mandate - if we can apply what we've learned, continue to learn, and successfully share new knowledge. In order to meet our challenges we must unify effort across all levels of our profession. We must attract and enculturate competent professionals and with them, continue to research and apply evidence about the most efficient and effective "what" and "how" special education can be.